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ABSTRACT

Study in writing processes, as presented in this paper, is based on the assumption that in order to write effectively, writers must be able not only to present ideas and feelings, but also to engage in the cognitive processes that will help them discover what they wish to say about a given idea, attitude, or set of data. These basic cognitive processes are as follows: focus, contrast, classification, reference to sequence, reference to physical context, and reference to change. Two studies, undertaken by Sage and by Cooper, Odell, and Courts, are explored in this paper-Sage's in detail. Although the research is not complete in either of these studies, it thus far tends to the conclusion that both teachers and researchers need to be concerned with identifying and helping students make effective use of these cognitive processes. (JF)

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Written Products and the Writing Process*

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As an in-class, impromptu writing assignment, a group of college freshmen were asked to "write as much as you can" about an ambiguous picture (Odell, 1973). One freshman wrote this:

> I haven't a care in the world, is what I feel the young lady is portraying. She is turning her head away from the world outside of her life. She appears to be a very proud, egocentric, and snide person. I see no kindness, just a vain, rich woman.

Another student wrote:

> The figure in the picture appears to be a woman-of sophistication. I imagine her riding in a coach of some sort down the streets of Paris back in the 1800's sometime. She seems to be dressed as an aristocrat for the times. Perhaps she has an extremely wealthy and high positioned father or maybe her husband has top political standing.
>
> I see her looking out the window of the coach as she rides through the slum area of Paris. Most women of her grace would not even attempt to gaze at the surroundings which are so different and unfamiliar compared to her own. But she is proving to herself how hard and cold she is.
>
> The smell of the garbage and the odour of the wandering dogs fills her nostrils. She thinks to herself of how she can't really smell the odours because of her strong smelling new French perfume.
>
> So the woman continues to ride, without thoughts of the rest of the world's situation. She closes her mind to any desires to better the lives of others.

In commenting on these two essays, we have to bear in mind that these are in-class essays written at the behest of someone who was not the regular teacher for the course. These two pieces do not provide any basis for generalizing about either student's overall writing ability. We suspect that the second student is the better writer--at least when expressive,

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descriptive writing is involved. But other assignments written under other circumstances might lead to a quite different assessment of the students' ability writing.

These reservations notwithstanding, we have chosen these two pieces of writing because they allow us to introduce some important terminology, and they illustrate one of the main points we wish to make. The two students came to essentially the same conclusion about the personality of the woman they saw in the picture. But the writing of the latter student reflects a much richer set of intellectual strategies, a greater range of cognitive processes that can be used in thinking about and giving meaning to the picture they had been shown. The second student classifies the woman in the picture (she is a woman of sophistication, her dress is that of an aristocrat), locates her in a sequence of actions (a journey from one point to another) and places her in a historical sequence (the 1800's) and a physical context (a foul-smelling slum in Paris). Further, the second student sets up several contrasts: between the woman in the picture and other women of her sort; between the woman's present surroundings and those to which she is accustomed; between what she does (she continues to ride) and what she might do (she might give some thought to improving others' situations). Finally, the second student varies the focus of her sentences. The first student focuses on, that is, uses as a grammatical subject of her clauses, the word she. The second student also focuses on she but, in addition, focuses on other people (the woman's husband, other women "of her grace") and on the physical setting in which the woman finds herself (the student makes a statement about the "smell of garbage and the odor of wandering dogs"). Our assumption in commenting on the grammatical subjects in the students' writing is this: the grammatical subject is a word or phrase

about which the rest of the sentence will make a comment. In changing the grammatical subject, one may change the kind of statement to be made in the rest of the sentence. Thus, analysis of grammatical focus-and especially shifts in grammatical focus-may help researchers identify some of the important aspects of a subject which a writer is selecting, that is, focusing upon, for special attention.

Our brief analysis of these two pieces of student writing lets us introduce and illustrate some basic cognitive processes we are concerned with: focus, contrast, classification, reference to sequence, reference to physical context. Not illustrated in our analysis is an additional cognitive process, reference to change. Our whole argument, now, rests on two assumptions: 1) that one or more of these cognitive processes are important in thinking about any subject; and 2) that these processes may be reflected in one's written or spoken language. We assume, in short, that analysis of written products may give us insight into some of the intellectual processes writers have engaged in while creating those products.

Having stated these assumptions, we wish to be clear about what we are not saying. First, we do not suggest that writers always make conscious, deliberate use of these intellectual processes. There is some evidence that students can be taught to make conscious use of contrast, classification, etc. (Young and Koen, 1973; Odell, 1974). But we have no basis for thinking, for example, that the second student writer mentioned above deliberately set out to create the contrasts we have identified in her writing. Furthermore, we cannot claim that our analysis reflects all the intellectual processes one engages in while writing. Some of the mental activity of a writer or any other thinker may be unconscious or at least, inaccessible to researchers. Finally, we must acknowledge that the finished

draft of an essay represents a number of choices made by a writer. For example, a writer may very well have considered--and then discarded--certain contrasts. Obviously, an analysis of the writer's final draft cannot possibly tell us about those discarded alternatives. It can only tell us about those choices--whether deliberate or reflexive --that find their way into a draft of a piece of writing.

Yet with these disclaimers, we would point out, first, that some form of the processes we are concerned with (contrast , classification, etc.) are among cognitive operations identified in the work of Guilford (1961;1967), Neisser (1967), Wallach (1958), and Bruner (1956). These processes are, at the least, an important part of one's mental activity.

Further, we have reason to assume that readers can be trained to identify these processes in students' writing. (For a discussion of ways to identify these processes, see Odell, 1977; for a report on rater reliability, see Odell, 1974). Here, we share an assumption articulated by Kenneth Pike: " If one assumes that thought itself is not fully structured until it is articulated through language - a view which I would personally hold - then any analysis of language forms would feed back on analysis of thought structure" (1967).

With these assumptions in mind, we wish to propose several basic questions for researchers who are interested in exploring the writing process. What cognitive processes are reflected in writing done by school age students? At a given age level, are there differences between the cognitive processes reflected in the writing of academically successful students and those processes reflected in the work of comparatively unsuccessful students? What developmental differences appear in the work of student writers at several age levels? Do older children use, say, contrast in ways that younger children do not? At present, these and related

questions figure in at least two studies. One study by Cooper, Odell, and Courts (Odell, 1977) involves a substantial writing sample, some 2000 pieces of writing from students at three grade levels. The other, by Sage, is more limited, involving 264 pieces of writing done by 88 students at the ninth and twelfth grade levels. Since Sage's study is somewhat nearer completion than is the Cooper, Odell, Courts Study, we shall discuss Sage's study and suggest some of its possible implications. Our comments will have to be illustrative and speculative; less tentative comments will be possible only after all student essays have been analyzed and results have been subjected to multivariate analysis of variance.

In identifying his two groups of students, Sage relied upon his school district's tracking system in which students' previous performance in each high school subject is used to place students in one of four tracks or levels. The fourth level includes students who are expected to attend a university after completing high school; the first level includes students who have severe learning difficulties. Students involved in Sage's study are taken from level four and level two, students who, on the basis of their high school record, are likely to attend a university and students, who, again on the basis of their records, are unlikely to seek any post-secondary education. All students in levels 2 and 4 of the Confederation Secondary School were assigned three writing tasks. To select participants at level 4, Sage identified the 40 ninth and 40 12th grade students who had the highest grade averages in English. From each group of 40, Sage selected 22 students at random. Level 2 participants were selected at random from all the level 2 students in the ninth and twelfth grades at Confederation Secondary School.

To illustrate Sage's procedures, we shall analyze excerpts from writing done by two twelfth grade writers. We shall speak to the first question we posed earlier: At a given age level are there differences between the cognitive processes reflected in the writing of university-bound students and those processes reflected in the writing of students who are not expected to receive post-secondary education?

For purposes of this presentation, we shall examine only brief passages; to allow the most reasonable comparison, we shall examine passages which appear to serve the same function in the two students' narratives. Each student has been assigned the task of writing a story about a young boy who works hard, saves his money, and buys his first car. Here are the students' accounts of the boy's working.

Level 2 Student:

> Right after school he started to look for a job. The first place Peter went to was a gas station. They told him he could start work tomorrow morning.
> He worked there all summer and made $6,200 all together.

Level 4 Student:

> Pete decided that it was time he looked for a second job. He had one part time job, but it wasn't bringing in enough money for his liking. Pete then found a second job working as an attendant in a gas station. It brought in more money, but it was hard on him. He would get up early and run down to his first job. When he quit at noon, he would run down to the gas station where he worked until a quarter till twelve. Doing this didn't do much for his leisure and his social life so he became run down. But getting the car kept him going.

Neither of these students goes into great detail about this part of the narrative, but the level 4 student's work is interesting to us because the student mentions several contrasts between what was actually true and what the character wished was true: The character did not have the money he wanted, the new job was harder on him than he might have wished; his social life was not what it might have been. In brief, the level 4 student

seems to be thinking about two questions at this point in her narrative: 1) what happened? (a question that the level 2 student answers, although in somewhat less detail); 2) How is the character's situation different from what the character might wish? We assume that one way of understanding any phenomenon is to consider how it contrasts with what might or should be. Thus we content that the level 4 student is considering details in this phase of her narrative in ways that the level 2 student is not. Her writing reflects a cognitive process not found in the passage from the level 2 student's writing.

This conclusion is supported in two additional passages, one from each student's writing, which tell what happened after the boy in the story had saved the money he needed to buy the car.

Level 2 Student:

> He worked there all summer and made $6,200 all together. His dad took him to get his license. He passed and went to get a new car the next day. The first thing he did after getting the car....

Level 4 Student:

> The day came. The money he had been saving now came to the price of the car, the car of his dream. The first thing he did was resign from his second job. Then he ran down to the car lot. With his luck, Peter arrived to find that the car lot was closed for the week. He was disappointed. He had waited this long and did not want to wait any further.

Again, the level 4 student suggests a contrast between what the boy hoped would be true and what was true. Also, the level 4 student makes several references to time sequence. The level 2 student says nothing about what happened between from the moment the boy went to get the car and the moment he went for a drive. But the level 4 student breaks the time sequence into smaller segments: first Peter quit his second job; then he ran down to the car lot; then he discovered that the lot was closed.

Also the level 4 student makes two additional references to time sequence: The lot would be closed for an entire week; the boy had been waiting for along time only to have his plans frustrated. These two references to time sequence (the length of time the boy had already been waiting and the length of time the boy would still have to wait) suggest that the level 4 writer has conceived of the boy's predicament in ways that the level 2 writer has not.

In pointing out distinctions between the writing of these two students, we must, again, stress that our analysis is illustrative, not conclusive. We present this analysis only to show why Sage hypothesizes that there might be differences between the cognitive processes reflected in writing done by Level 2 students and writing done by level 4 students. In addition to testing this hypothesis, Sage also plans to explore other questions we posed earlier. Are there differences between cognitive processes reflected in the writing of level 2 ninth grade students and the processes reflected in the writing of level 4 ninth grade students? Can one discover developmental differences in students' use of these processes? If any of these questions should be answered affirmatively, one immediately thinks of an additional question that lies outside the scope of Sage's study: Can a given teaching procedure influence the way these processes are used by student writers at a given age or ability level?

Thus far, we have considered the thinking processes in writing done in response to a very specific set of directions. Sage asked students in his study to write a short story based on a given situation. Students were instructed that they were to tell the story from the point of view of an omniscient narrator and that they were to concentrate on creating an interesting story with a clear plot and realistic characters. In other

words, Sage did not want his students to use their stories to make a point or illustrate some moral. He was interested in students' skill with what discourse theorists call poetic or literary discourse (Britton, 1975; Kinneavy, 1971). He wanted his students to tell a good story, without trying to persuade or inform their readers or even to propound the writer's own attitudes and ideas.

Sage contends that the sort of writing done in response to his assignment is important, if only because if typifies one sort of writing students in his school system are often expected to do. But Sage is, nonetheless, careful to note that responses to this one assignment may not let us generalize about these students' writing performance on other, quite different tasks. Both of us accept, at least provisionally, a basic assumption from current discourse theory: different rhetorical tasks--that is, writing addressed to different audiences and intended to accomplish different purposes--may make very different demands of a writer. The conceptual processes involved in writing, say, a persuasive letter to a close friend may be quite different from the processes needed to explain an abstract idead to an audience with whom one has little or no personal contact. As a corollary of this premise, we have to assume that Sage's conclusions about students' performance on one type of writing might not apply to their performance on other types of writing. That is, even, if one is willing to grant that conceptual processes may be reflected in students' written products, one must still expect to encounter at least two further difficulties. It may be that, in order to get a comprehensive understanding of conceptual processes reflected in students' writing, researchers may have to examine students' work in response to several different types of writing tasks. Further, if researchers do find that different

kinds of writing tasks make different demands of writers, they will encounter an additional problem in exploring the development of writing ability. When researchers analyze the work of writers at different ages, they will have to be sure they are analyzing comparable pieces of writing. One may not follow the sort of procedure used by Kellogg Hunt (1977) in his early studies of the development of syntactic performance. One may not lump together such apparently diverse types of writing as book reports, diary entries, and letters. One must, rather, use current discourse theory to identify important types of writing tasks and--for each type of task--compare the work of students at different age levels. At present, a study by Cooper, Odell, and Courts accepts these constraints. Some 7,000 pieces of writing from some 600 students in grades 4, 8, and 12 have been gathered. Each student was given several writing assignments in each of three discourse types: expression, persuasion, and explanation. Each eighth and twelfth grader did four pieces of expressive writing, four of explanatory, and four of persuasive. Each fourth grader did six pieces of each of these three types of writing. Results of this study should let researchers see whether cognitive processes (and other features of writing such as syntax and organizational patterns) vary according to age, ability level, and type of writing assignment.

Underlying both the Sage study and the Cooper, Odell, Courts study is this assumption: In order to write effectively, writers must be able not only to present ideas and feelings but also to engage in the cognitive processes that will help them discover what they wish to say about a given idea, attitude, or set of data. On the basis of this assumption, we submit that both teachers and researchers need to be concerned with identifying and helping students make effective use of these processes. Through our

analysis of pieces of student writing done at different age and ability levels, we hope to show how one might understand a writer's use of some of the writing processes and, ultimately, show writers how they might improve their written products.

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